

Weaponisation of War Memories and Anti-German Sentiment

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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In the aftermath of the tumultuous events in Brussels and Athens, public opinions in Europe and elsewhere have been rapidly polarised, to an extent perhaps not seen in decades. The dramatic deterioration of Greek finances (both public and private) with the consequent set of social and political impacts, have produced the mobilisation of very strong language and imageries from all sides. Many commentators, some as authoritative and diverse as Jürgen [Habermas](#), or Slavoj [Žižek](#), have explicitly sounded the alarm that this may well be the [end](#) of the European project, preluding a return of inter-state rivalries and possibly wars. The handling of the Greek crisis has allegedly shown both within the EU as an organisation, as well as in the mindset and behaviour of the European political leaders, a lack of concern for “core values” such as democracy and solidarity.

This polarisation owes much to the uncomfortable landscape of political communication in Europe, dominated as it is, for reasons which escape the scope of this piece, by slogans built on gross oversimplifications and emotional appeals to knee-jerk reactions. The Greek government has been particularly active on this front by using the *escamotage* of a snap referendum to present its course of action and its position as the “democratic” one. It does not actually matter what is meant here by democracy in analytical terms. The point is that, in a binary opposition (Germany vs. Greece), if one side occupies the ground of “democracy”, i.e. of something practically all Europeans have been raised to consider as a synonym of “absolute good”, the other must rest on the ground of “absolute evil”. Any attempt at showing that the matter is more complicated than this is doomed to fail considering that it would require a somewhat more sophisticated form of communication, currently restricted to a certainly influential, nevertheless rather small part of the population and the electorate. The same is true of “solidarity”, whose alleged counterpart, the dreaded [austerity](#), cannot be but the manifestation of sheer sadism, greed and other moral evils, incarnated by essentially degenerated individuals. More nuanced [analyses](#) of the Greek economic and [political](#) situation, often with remarkable long-term historical insights, are plenty, but they can hardly scratch the thick skin of the Manichean *behemot*.



There is nothing terribly new in the drift towards hyper-simplification, slogan politics, and Manichean communication strategies. Habermas himself dedicated to the “structural transformation of the public sphere” one of his early works (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 1962), developing ideas already articulated *in nuce* by Max Weber.

What is remarkable is however the way in which a perfectly legitimate resentment against European politics, political leaders, their decisions, and their background political culture, has been channeled, or has channeled itself, into a veritable anti-German hysteria, with wide range implications for the political outlook and prospects of the European project, a revival of interethnic animosity which was supposed to be a thing of the past.

An attentive press reader would have by now noticed the proliferation of the number of anti-German lines of argument. Firstly, that the euro is a German project, which operates at the exclusive advantage of Germany and its economy. Indeed, the Germans and their closer allies are getting richer, while the rest of the Eurozone’s population is getting poorer. Secondly, the euro is in essence a project for Germany’s domination of the continent, a dream

which the Germans have never given up, have secretly nurtured in the seven decades elapsed since the end of WWII, and it is now finally taking shape: the Fourth *Reich*. Thirdly, Germany is destroying Europe for the third time in a century. Fourthly, the Germans still have not paid for their past wrongdoings, compensation is still waiting, not to mention that the Germans are resisting the cancellation of Greece's debt, while their post-war debt was cancelled back in 1953. The Germans, particularly their Federal Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble, are behaving irresponsibly, as in all previous historical occasions.

There is a rather limited amount of truth in all these points. The euro is a multilateral initiative which has been debated for many years and approved with the free consensus of the (democratically elected) governments involved. According to some historical reconstructions, the idea of proceeding with a currency union in the European project was championed by [France](#) as a way to tie and tame a re-unified Germany within the European Union. The rules enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty were debated and accepted as the standard of what EH Carr may have called "economic morality", with the rejection of former practices such as currency devaluation and the adoption a strong dose of neo-liberal economic doctrines. The wisdom of such construction is certainly debatable, but it does not support the idea that the euro is a project imposed by Germany onto other EU countries.

It is difficult to deny that German industry has prospered (with certain limits) relative to other euro members' economies since the introduction of the common currency. However, this is largely a matter of context, and of perspective. Germany's history of industrial development is a history of high quality product export. In particular, the manufacturing sector has been specialised in industrial machinery, luxury goods and other technologically advanced equipment which still today do not find immediate substitute. For all kinds of industrial machinery, from high quality typography to bread production, there is little or no substitute for German products. This is the key aspect of German industrial success. In a context in which emerging economies' growth has vastly outpaced the developed world and has become the majority share of the global economy, it is not surprising that markets for German-made goods have been constantly expanding, as those countries seek to build up their production capacities, enhance quality, while their middle and upper classes seek luxury goods. Contrary to the widespread idea that Germany's huge surplus is a drain on the finances of the Euro periphery, trade within the Eurozone is [fairly balanced](#), while most of the surplus is generated by extra-Eurozone trade. Furthermore, the bulk of Germany's population is not actually profiting much from all this, as new forms of [poverty](#) are rapidly spreading.

As for historical recriminations and other risky comparisons, it is worth recalling that Germany in 1953 was an occupied and divided country. It is worth remembering that, however incalculable the damages produced by the Third *Reich*'s policies, Germany has lost about a third of its pre-war territory, countless cities and villages, from Memel, to Königsberg, Danzig, Stettin, Breslau, whose inhabitants were deported, losing everything they had. Other crucial points are political and economic. The economic reconstruction of post WWII Western Europe required the rapid restarting of German industries to the benefit of all other countries. It was a pillar, as it became, of the West-European political-economic order, in the context of the Cold War and the fight against the growing Communist movement. Secondly, not only the historical comparison with Greece is flawed as it does not capture the strategic and political ramifications of the 1953 debt cancellation, but it fails to understand a much more elementary factor: even if debt relief were to be granted (the Greek debt will have to be cancelled in one way or the other), the Greek economy would need immediate *additional* debt in order to "function" on its current footing. That is the reason behind the idea that Greece needs urgent and even draconian reforms.

Historically, the construction of a post-war European political order came, as it happens in any political order, with the enhancement of legitimization narratives grounded on a certain reading of the past. Historical narratives are the work of historians, the stratification of layer upon layer of revision, critique, discovery and interpretation of sources. From a political perspective though, not all history matters in the same way. The Second Macedonian War (200-197 BC), an event of enormous impact on world history, is for a contemporary European not as remotely important as the French Revolution of 1789. This in turn pales in comparison to the events of the first half of the twentieth century, particularly the Second World War. It is not just a question of temporal proximity, but of symbols underpinning the existing political order. From an orthodox Marxist-Leninist perspective, as celebrated until the end of the Cold War,

the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the pivotal event in human history. For the purpose of US domestic politics, the semantics of the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) is probably more prominent than all other wars with the partial exception of the Civil War (1861-1865).

In the context of the European and more in general of the post 1945 international order, the symbolism of WWII indisputably lies at the semantic core of the whole construction. There is no need to remind the reader, for instance, of the large scale media effort to commemorate the events of that war, especially on the seventieth anniversary of its end.

The European project has been based on the idea of leaving the past behind and re-building Europe, not by forgetting what happened, but by renouncing the weaponisation of past memories for the sake of contingent political matters. However, there has always been a contradiction in this process.

This tension has never been fully resolved, but has remained suspended by means of a compromise prescribing the unacceptability of German hegemony in any form, but only a collegial leadership with other major partners, especially France.

However, historical dynamics are now bringing this tension back to the surface, undermining such compromise. The Germans, even if they may not desire to lead, even if it appears very questionable to what extent Berlin does actually possess any vision, and even if they would do anything to avoid the dangers of historical grievances, are compelled by sheer circumstances to take the leading role as others, particularly France, have sunk to political and economic impotence (alongside Italy).

As a reaction to this, the taboo of large scale weaponisation of [war memories](#) has been broken.

The emergence of a German hegemony (as in the Greek meaning of “showing the way”), has thus opened the space for the easy construction of admittedly simplistic, nevertheless powerful counter-narratives, which not only mobilise, as mentioned, the “values” of democracy and solidarity, but absorb, appropriate, possibly hijack the symbols of the antifascist struggle on which the European construction is founded, becoming undisputable, impermeable to critique, and unstoppable. The EU finds itself in an awkward position: on the one hand it is to be identified with the (evil) euro project, and indirectly with German leadership, arrogance, and neo-imperial ambitions, but on the other, it has to stand for its core values and symbols, at risk of being itself labelled a “fascist organisation”, i.e. impossible to side with, as numerous political parties are rapidly [discovering](#).

As absurd as it may appear to more analytical minds, this works by and large for the sake of polarising public opinion, the ultimate goal of electoral politics. However, this will come at a price. The euro and the EU project rest on an increasingly thin agreement between Germany and the rest on how to manage the essentially bankrupt periphery. It is unclear to what extent this agreement will hold in the future. If the political and economic costs will become too high for Berlin, in the presence of geopolitical alternatives which the crisis, paradoxically, is making more apparent, such as a smaller union with central European and Baltic nations, the temptation of considering the current political arrangement as no longer viable will become irresistible.

There is no easy way out of all this. Ideally, the European project should change the historical narrative on which it is grounded, moving away from a fixation on a rather narrow reading of WWII, but also from the otherwise a-historical outlook which characterises it (may the reader think about the absence of any recognisable historical reference in the EU flag, or in the euro banknotes), the disregard of collectivities in the face of an individualistic focus. With all probability, such a change will occur only in consequence of future events which will supersede WWII in the collective memory of the Europeans.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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